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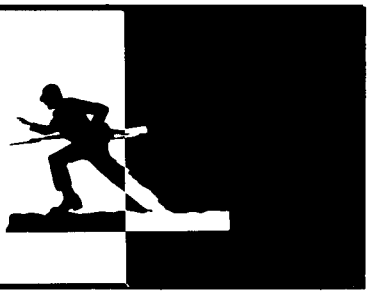

The 10th Mountain Division
Training from the Ground Up

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In 1941 the Active Army of the United States had more than 1.5 million men in uniform. The nation's entry into the war came as little surprise to our nation's civilian and military leaders; in anticipation of the gathering storm, the Army had expanded from its low of only 210,000 men at the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. Still, the United States was in no position to carry the war to the Axis powers. It needed to create many new combat divisions. This is the story of one such division—the 10th Mountain Division—which was specially created for fighting in mountainous terrain.

The 10th Mountain Division was unusual during a time when units trained as rapidly as possible and then deployed into an expanding war. It was built and trained slowly over a period of two years before it was committed to combat. In the difficult terrain of mountainous Italy, there was a definite need for a unit trained for mountaineering. Unfortunately, this division was held back from the time of the September 9, 1943 invasion of mainland Italy until January 1945, just in time for the final offensive.

The germination of the idea for a special unit trained in mountain warfare began in February 1939 with C. Minot (Minnie) Dole of the National Ski Patrol and Roger Langley of the National Ski Association, both of whom were ski enthusiasts. A discussion of the Russo-Finnish War, then in progress, resulted in a comparison of the merits of the two armies. Both Dole and Langley applauded the tactics of the Finnish troops who were adept skiers:

Dressed in white uniforms to match the backdrop of snow, the Finns glided quietly on long, narrow skis through forests to attack the Russians moving along plowed roads. Then after surprising and ambushing the Russians at a point of the Finnish army's choosing, they returned to the forest, secure in the knowledge that no mechanized vehicle nor man on foot could follow them.

The two men then concluded that American troops were more similar to those slow-moving troops of Russia than to the fast-moving, efficient Finns, and set out to correct the deficiency.

Support for this new type of combat unit was not immediate. Over the next 14 months, Dole and Langley met with representatives of the U.S. Army to press for the creation of a combat division of skiers and mountaineers. Dole took the lead in the project and phoned government officials he had known when he was a student at Yale. Finally, in April 1941, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall approved the project and ordered the training of a division of troops who would be adept skiers and climbers.

At the conclusion of the building of the new division, it consisted of some 300 experienced skiers and veteran mountaineers, 6,000 younger skiers, 3,000 draftees (who had to be taught to ski), and 3,000 non-skiing support personnel—such as administrators, medics, mule skinners, horse wranglers, and artillery specialists.

Because of indecision within the Army, the location for the new training post changed from Yellowstone National Park, the site originally suggested, to Fort Lewis, Washington. Eventually, a new facility was constructed at Camp Hale, high in the Colorado Rocky Mountains near the town of Pando, 20 miles from Leadville, Colorado. Meantime, new mountain troopers were trained at Fort Lewis.

The composition of the new unit included many expert skiers and climbers. The first soldier to report to the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment (the division's first regiment) was a ski racer, Charles D. McLane, of the Dartmouth Outing Club. After the unit had moved to Camp Hale, the other two regiments, the 85th and 86th Mountain Infantry Regiments, joined the 87th.

The Army used a unique recruiting tool to improve the quality of personnel at Camp Hale. The National Ski Patrol recruited 3,000 skiing men by the summer of 1943, many of them international champion skiers and climbers, among them men from Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Norway. One battalion, the 99th, was composed entirely of soldiers of Norwegian ancestry. There were also refugees from almost every country in Europe.

Upon arrival at Camp Hale, the new mountain soldiers found very Spartan conditions. The camp was in a narrow, steep-walled basin, high in the mountains at an altitude of 9,500 feet. In winter, the average depth of the snow was about 12 feet, and the temperature sometimes fell to 30 degrees below zero. The altitude and basin-like location caused dizziness, and the coal-burning stoves created a great deal of pollution that caused a cough, called the "Pando hack," which soldiers could escape only by climbing one of the nearby mountain peaks. (The poor conditions at Camp Hale were so well known that Walter Winchell, at the time America's best-known radio newsman, told his listeners, "Mothers and fathers of American soldiers, if you have a son in the Solomons or Camp Hale, don't worry about your son in the Solomons.") Recreation was also difficult for the ski troops to find, even in nearby Leadville. At the early stages of the division's training, Leadville was considered too wild for the soldiers, and the Army declared the town off-limits.

The barracks that housed the ski troopers were wooden structures, heated with coal. The beds had no sheets—only two blankets and a comforter. One room was set aside for drying ski equipment and clothing.

Most of the members of the 87th had received one year of skiing experience at Fort Lewis. Most members of the other units not only lacked significant skiing experience, but had never been on skis. A training program began immediately but was ineffective because the relatively junior instructors were unable to get their superiors to attend training. This weakness in training became apparent in February 1943 when the unit participated in a training exercise that resulted in utter chaos. The division then made changes that ensured all soldiers and officers would receive the required training. High rank no longer provided an exemption. In March and April 1944, the 10th Mountain Division conducted a similar exercise. Although much improved from the previous winter, many of the problems were still apparent.

The division conducted more traditional training in the use of gas masks and weapons in addition to training in skiing and rock-climbing. In the beginning, birch logs were used in place of rifles, which were in short supply. When the men were ordered to "fall out," they made a mad rush to get the lightest logs.

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Even in the cold climate, physical conditioning was not neglected: Calisthenics were conducted on the rocky drill field early every morning. Usually, the temperature hovered around freezing.

Training for the new mountain troops included carrying approximately 100 pounds of equipment that the division believed necessary to survive and fight in the mountains, and at an altitude where U.S. Army Air Corps pilots turned on their oxygen. Army manuals for high-altitude training set a maximum load of 45 pounds per soldier.

The use of 5,000 mules as pack animals was a central feature of the division. The mules were eugenically bred at Fort Reno, Oklahoma, for transporting artillery and supplies in mountainous terrain. Typically, a mule carried a 100-pound pack on top of a 100-pound saddle. Learning to handle the usually stubborn animals required a lot of training, as well as a lot of mule-inflicted pain.

Another challenge facing the new division was the selection of gear and clothing that could sustain the soldiers in combat in the cold, mountainous environment. Many experts participated in a series of conferences on military equipment. (Such civilian companies as Montgomery Ward and L.L. Bean supplied a lot of the equipment.) It had to be durable, rugged, lightweight, standardized, and made of materials that were not in short supply in the United States. Existing weaponry provided the artillery and firearms, although with some adaptations.

The uniform the division eventually adopted included a reversible windbreaker, olive drab on one side and white on the other. Other items included the knitted wool cap, poplin ski cap, wool sweater with button-up neck, wool ski pants for very cold conditions, and poplin pants for warmer weather. The trigger-finger mitten provided warmth with the flexibility needed to fire weapons. Many of these items are still used by the Army today.

The need for skiing equipment provided numerous problems for the soldiers of the division. Ski goggles were the most problematic, and the division tested numerous designs. The Army ultimately adopted several of these but none were totally satisfactory. Skis also saw considerable testing and evolution during the war years. Those that were eventually adopted were difficult for the novice to control. "Climbers"—mohair and canvas strips—were attached to the undersides of the skis to allow the skier to slide forward while preventing him from sliding backward. The same principle is still used today in the "fish-scale" design of cross-country skis.

Soldiers of the division needed a universal boot that could be used in skiing as well as marching and climbing. The continual search for the ideal ski boot caused its alteration more than any other piece of mountaineering equipment during the war.

Camping equipment, for life in a cold environment, included a medium-weight poplin tent which, like the windbreaker, was white on one side and olive drab on the other. But this tent was so effective in keeping out moisture that it also trapped moisture inside. Thus, the tent was never popular among soldiers; they disliked the moisture prob-

lem and the effort involved in erecting and taking down the tent. During the February 1943 maneuvers, many mountaineers arranged their tents in neat military rows but chose to sleep in snow caves or snow-block igloos.

The sleeping bag the Army eventually produced was mummy-shaped. Since goose down was in short supply, manufacturers substituted chopped chicken feathers, which made the bag slightly heavier. The bag was very popular, however, and continued to be used after the war by a generation of campers, hikers, and climbers. Other products included the development of nylon rope to replace Philippine hemp rope. Soldiers were issued climbing ropes, ice axes, pitons, piton hammers, and rucksacks. The mode of transportation for use in the snow was the "weasel," a forerunner of today's snowmobile. The Army developed the specialized C-ration, high in fat content, for feeding the soldiers in the field. These were supplemented with fruit bars.

In June 1943 the Army designated the regiments at Camp Hale the 10th Light Infantry Division, and Major General Lloyd Jones assumed command. He proved unpopular with the soldiers of the division. On one occasion during a snowstorm, he directed a number of soldiers to police 50 square miles on the sides of the Rocky Mountains for any trash or debris that soldiers on maneuvers may have left. On another occasion, when asked how the maneuvers of March and April 1944 had gone, he minimized the number of cold weather casualties and other injuries and expressed obvious contempt for those who failed to complete every part of the arduous exercise.

On 22 June 1944 the 10th Light Division moved to Camp Swift, Texas, where it was redesignated the 10th Mountain Division on 6 November 1944. On 23 November Major General George P. Hays, who had commanded the 2d Division Artillery on the western front in France in World War I, replaced General Jones as division commander. He was a very capable commander whom Lieutenant General Lucius K. Truscott, Jr., his 5th Army Commander, described as "one of the ablest battle leaders I ever knew" and said he "fitted the division like a well-worn and well-loved glove."

After all other Allied Theater commanders had rejected the division because of its small size and other unique features, the Army assigned the 10th Mountain Division to Fifth Army in Italy. Although the Army was prepared to send it to other theaters of operation, this fortuitous development put the 10th Division in the right environment to make use of its mountaineering skills.

On 11 December 1944 the 86th Infantry Regiment left the United States bound for the port of Naples, Italy, arriving there on the 23d. Briefly stopping at a staging area in Bagnoli, Italy, just north of Naples, the regiment then proceeded on 26 December to the front in northern Italy. The first of the combat regiments of the 10th Division finally arrived at its sector of the Italian front on 9 January 1945. On 28 January the last elements of the division completed the move from the United States to the Italian front.

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The 10th Mountain Division's long and thorough training was well known, and it was held in high esteem. Its 87th Infantry Regiment had participated in the unopposed landings on Kiska in the Aleutian Islands. The 30-mile front it occupied in Italy ran from Mt. Belvedere to the Serchio Valley and passed through some of the highest and most rugged terrain of the northern Apennines. Because this terrain was not practicable for a large-scale assault, it was lightly held by both sides. But it was also here that the division's specialized training could provide the greatest benefit.

In the first of three major offensives, the 10th Mountain Division proved its worth and provided a glimpse of what it would do in the future. The key to the stalemate in Italy was Highway 64, one of two main roads through the Apennines leading toward Bologna. The Fifth Army plan required the scaling of a 1,500-foot cliff at the Sarasiccia-Campania ridge. During the night of 18-19 February, the division scaled the cliff and took the German defenders by surprise. Soldiers of the division then repelled German counterattacks. The division focused its main effort on the Belvedere-Gorgolesco hill mass with the 85th and 87th Regiments. To gain surprise in this attack, the division avoided the normal use of preparatory artillery fire. This plan worked, and the division gained the crests of Mount Belvedere and Mount Gorgolesco on 20 February. The division then advanced against the crest of Mount Torraccia in the face of strong German opposition and reached the summit on the 24th.

The second phase of the Allied plan began on 3 March. Following an artillery barrage and tactical air support, the division cleared the enemy from the ridges to a point south of Vergato, seized Castel d'Aiano. Then it beat off the repeated counterattacks of the 29th Panzer Division, which the German Command had rushed in to support its crumbling front. General Truscott then stopped the progress of the attack; it would be another month before the spring offensive, and he wanted to avoid forcing the Germans to commit more reserves into the area. The 10th Division had provided an impressive performance in the two stages of this first battle. It had inflicted heavy losses on the Germans and had taken more than 1,200 prisoners. It had also set an example for the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, its neighboring unit in the attack, which had previously failed to make progress. The success of the division, a result of its mountain climbing skill, had been so overwhelming that it had to be ordered to stop, lest it spoil other plans all along the front.

The final offensive in Italy, one in which the 10th Division was heavily involved, began 14 April 1945. In general, the plan the Allies had established called for the 5th Army to enter the Po Valley and capture Bologna. The British Eighth Army would cross the Santerno River. Both armies would then

break through German defenses and surround the Germans south of the Po River. Finally, both armies would cross the Po, advance to the north, capturing Verona, and then move to the Brenner Pass in the Alps. In this operation, the division cleared the Pra Del Bianco basin and secured Torre Iussi and Rocca di Roffeno. Spearheading the Allied drive, the division then took various mountains and emerged into the Po valley on 20 April.

In this action, the skill and valor of the 10th Division were demonstrated by a soldier assigned to the 85th Infantry Regiment, who earned the only Medal of Honor awarded to the division. On 14 April 1945, Private First Class John D. Magrath made the supreme sacrifice near Castel d'Aiano, Italy. (Another casualty that day was future Kansas Senator and presidential candidate Second Lieutenant Robert Dole. Never a volunteer for the ski troops, he had come to Italy in December 1944 as a replacement and joined the 85th Regiment in February 1945. On April 14, during heavy combat, Lieutenant Dole courageously dragged his wounded runner to cover before being hit. He suffered the loss of one kidney as well as the use of his right shoulder and arm.)

By now, the German Army in Italy was collapsing in a state of confusion and disorder when the 10th Division penetrated its lines. German prisoners surrendered by the thousands. Those German units that still had some semblance of order were trying to escape across the Po River. Three American divisions, including the 10th, crossed the Po on 26 April in pursuit of those Germans who had escaped (most by swimming), as well as to complete the total conquest of Italy. Their goal was the Brenner Pass, which led to Austria.

The 10th Division continued along the eastern shore of Lake Garda. The headquarters of Italian leader Benito Mussolini had been located on the western shore, and the division was to conduct an amphibious operation to capture him and other Fascist officials. Meanwhile, Mussolini had escaped toward Switzerland. Partisans captured him en route and shot him and his mistress before Allied officials could rescue them.

On 2 May the German forces in Italy surrendered to the Allies. German General von Senger requested that he be escorted to the surrender ceremony on May 3 by General Hays, his principal opponent in the final days of the war. The 10th Mountain Division had spearheaded the attack that brought about the final defeat of the German Armies in Italy.

Although the division continued to participate in Allied actions, such as advancing to the Austrian border and securing Trieste, near the Yugoslav border, all significant combat had ended on 2 May. The Army planned to convert the 10th Mountain Division to a regular infantry division and send it to the Pacific Theater for the invasion of Japan. In August 1945, while the division was in the United States, that plan was cancelled when Japan surrendered. The division deactivated on 30 November 1945 at Camp Carson, Colorado, near the spot where it was formed.

In spite of its outstanding wartime record, the division's creation and development is a classic study in how not to create a new military unit.

In battle, the 10th Mountain Division was one of the U.S. Army's finest. Its combat achievements were virtually unequalled.

It trained for a comparatively long time—spending a lot of time, effort, and misery—to acquire skills that were never used. For example, a great deal of time was devoted to skiing. Training in skiing is a time-consuming enterprise that is very wasteful if the skill is not used. Although the soldiers of the division were often referred to as "ski troops," only three platoons ever skied in battle. Much more useful were its mountain climbing abilities, which surprised the Germans and broke the stalemate.

When the division went to Italy, it did not deploy as an elite unit, but as regular infantry. The casualties suffered were also heavy, with 4,154 wounded and 992 killed.

The unit was not used to its fullest capability, and it was not developed according to reasonable expectations of probable needs. The altitude was too high for military needs and resulted in countless and needless training casualties. During World War II, no targets existed much above 5,000 feet in any theater. Accordingly, soldiers should have been trained at lower altitudes, where combat action was more probable. The heavy loads the soldier carried is another example of the focus on unrealistic training that resulted in needless hardships and training casualties.

Fortunately, the Army has learned from its mistakes with the 10th Mountain Division. Current doctrine requires that a unit be used in accordance with its abilities. It follows that training must mirror the expected need for combat skills. With a process called backward planning, once the probable needs are identified, a plan is developed to provide the training for those skills as well as unit assets. The end result is a unit tailored for the specific combat situation.

Military units are expensive to create and fully train. To develop skills and not use them is wasteful. The example of the 10th Mountain Division shows what happens when planning is not directed at developing a combat unit that is better suited to the expected battle situation. The division performed extremely well, nevertheless, breaking the stalemate that had developed in the mountains of northern Italy. But its introduction into combat in the early days of the Italian Campaign might well have led to an earlier end for the war. And in that slow-moving campaign, it most certainly would have resulted in fewer casualties.

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